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THE WONDERLAND : Creative thinking, and lack of it, in madrasahs

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Madrasah for girls in Dhaka

TO SOMEONE who has never been here before, I suppose it can feel a little like being Alice in Wonderland. The winding staircase, with very little sunlight seeping in through narrow windows, a faint mossy odour, and slippery steps, resembled the rabbit hole that Alice went down. And much like Alice, we didn't quite know what would be at the end of the tunnel. We were conducting fieldwork for a study that was to be exploratory, with no hypothesis, inductive in its approach, where we wanted to surrender the story to those who played parts in it. Except unlike Alice, we were going up the tunnel, instead of down, as was our research, taking a bottom-up approach.

It turned out that journey through the tunnel became more like a journey on a train with two stops. The first stop we made was at the teachers' lounge. Like all exciting journeys we made a wrong turn and entered the male teacher's lounge first. Here, where the walls of culture that divided men and women were higher than the Great Wall of China, for two young women to walk into the male teacher's lounge was an almost dangerous mistake to make. This was a madrasah after all.

This particular institution was established in 1961, ten years before the birth of the nation. It is one of the 9,300 Aliya madrasahs in Bangladesh that follow the curriculum of the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board, among which only 6 per cent are in Dhaka. What is interesting about this particular one is that it started out as an all girls madrasah to house orphan girls who had nowhere to go. Much of its work started after the liberation war in 1971, with many children left homeless, with no access to bare necessities of food, clothing and shelter. Some of

the teachers we spoke to had been serving at the madrasah since its very inception. To them, concepts such as creativity were far from familiar. So their introduction to creative curriculum for Bangla, social science and Islamic history for grade 9 (Alim level) was fairly recent, and fairly baffling.

When asked about their thoughts on the creative curriculum introduced by the government, they shared their confusion. General thoughts were admission of the fact that they had little understanding of what it meant for curriculum to be creative. The books had been updated. The patterns of questions changed. But how were they to teach students to think creatively? And how were they to grade their students? How does one truly measure creativity? Can creativity be measured? A Harvard business review article published in March 2013 claims that we have had the technology to measure creativity since the latter half of the last century when the first framework for creative thinking was established by psychologists Joy Paul Guilford and E Paul Torrance. Unfortunately, few people, teachers or otherwise know of the measurement tools at their disposal, let alone use them. The creative curriculum has been introduced by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board as well as the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board. And while this was a huge step forward, the step has not been followed up with training the teachers on what it means to have a creative curriculum or to be creative in a classroom. While the Bangladesh Madrasah Teachers' Training Institute offered subject based training for Dakhil, Alim and Kamil level teachers, the courses offered include only communicative Arabic and biology. As a result, unfortunately, much of the benefit of this great endeavour had been lost.

But there is more to creativity than curriculum or teachers. In fact, Torrance listed 8 factors that affected the development and/or expression of creative thinking; education level, differential treatment of boys and girls, premature attempts to eliminate fantasy, restrictions on manipulateness and curiosity, conditions resulting in fear and timidity in both authority and peer relations, misplaced emphasis on certain verbal skills, especially on mechanics, overemphasis on prevention and on 'success', lack of resources for working out ideas. While teachers have much to do with many of the above listed factors, some of it is a result of the institutional culture and environment. In fact, according to theorist, Eleni Mellou, young children's creativity in educational institutions is influenced by creative environment, creative programmes alongside creative teachers and ways of teaching.

In order to explore the first two factors in nurturing creativity suggested by Mellou, we made the second stop in our journey, in one of the classrooms in the residential madrasah, which also served as the dining room and the bedroom for the girls residing there. It was after school so only about 20 girls huddled together in corners of the room, sitting with their knees folded, some of them shrinking themselves. We asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. One of them wanted to be an engineer. We asked them what they understood of the creative curriculum, if they understood creativity, if they were comfortable with it. Interestingly, the girls reported finding the new pattern of questions easier to answer. However, they said they still got better marks if they produced memorised answers.

We spent some more time with the girls and as the day passed and they opened up some more, they began to share about their hobbies. Some of them kept journals, some sang, some danced, some painted, and some told jokes. Each child was different, creative in her own way, despite the seemingly repressive environment fostering fear and timidity, despite the lack of resources

for ideation, despite emphasis on rote learning and memorisation and despite the little scope to fantasise. These children were warriors who fought to let their creativity survive, against all odds.

There wasn't much opportunity to create in these classrooms. Their daily diet of rice and daal that was as devoid of creativity as were their teachers. There were no storybooks they could read, no access to television, or the internet where they could learn about the world. Yet, they created.

As we walked out through the doors, we realised that the end of the tunnel, a conclusion to the research we were conducting on creativity of madrasah students, had yet to be seen. But the two stops we had made had surprised us. There was much left to be explored but this much was certain. If these children were able to create despite all of their constraints, imagine what their creativity would be if they were placed in environments surrounded by teachers who understood and applauded creativity. Imagine if they were given physically and metaphysically open spaces where they could be left to discover. Who knows what they could create?

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